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Psychodynamics Coaching: Enhancing Leaders' Executive Presence

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the application of psychodynamic coaching to enhance leaders' Executive Presence by working with unconscious psychic mechanisms. In the first part of the study, the relevance of the research is substantiated. Amid escalating turbulence and cultural risks, a leader's ability to instantly convey confidence and substance (Executive Presence) becomes a key intangible asset of the organization. At the same time, classical leadership programs, focused on superficial behavioral techniques, do not address deep cognitive–emotional patterns, which reduces the effectiveness of change efforts and increases the risk of transformation failures. The study aims to describe the theoretical foundations and empirical evidence for the effectiveness of psychodynamic coaching as a tool for deeply strengthening Executive Presence. The novelty of the work lies in combining four methodological approaches (meta-analyses, correlational studies, content analysis of clinical cases, and longitudinal analysis of defense mechanisms) and in a systemic interpretation of the role of unconscious drivers, transference–countertransference, and narrative identity in forming the leader's aura. The Results and Discussion show that psychodynamic coaching enhances the integrity of Executive Presence through: 1) training mature defenses (DMRS) and emotion regulation; 2) analysis of the dynamics of transference and countertransference; 3) work with internal sub-roles and double-bind situations; 4) reconstruction of personal and organizational narratives. Practical cases and statistical data demonstrate a significant increase in the perceived authenticity of the leader, a reduction in cross-functional tension, and the durability of behavioral changes. This article will be helpful for coaches, HR specialists, organizational psychologists, and executives striving for the systemic development of leadership competencies.

Keywords: psychodynamic coaching, Executive Presence, leadership, unconscious mechanisms, transference, defense mechanisms, narrative identity

Introduction

In conditions of abrupt turbulence, as described in a Deloitte survey of 14,000 respondents from 95 countries—where leading trends are shaped under the pressure of unpredictable global events, the rapid development of AI, and the erosion of familiar work models—a leader's ability to instantly convey confidence, clarity, and calm becomes a critical intangible asset of the organization (Deloitte Insights, 2024).

Nevertheless, most leadership programs boil down to behavioral coaching: honing body language, ironclad rhetoric, dress code, etc. Such a superficial approach rarely touches deep cognitive–emotional patterns and therefore does not eliminate the root causes of stress reactions. Hence the systemic paradox: McKinsey notes that 70% of organizational transformations fail, with 70% of failures attributed precisely to cultural—that is, psychological—factors that are not addressed by training in correct behaviors (Dewar & Doucette, 2018).

Psychodynamic coaching proposes to bridge this gap by working with unconscious drivers, transference, and defense mechanisms that determine how a leader sounds to their environment. The classic study by Kilburg describes how unconscious conflicts and object relations shape managerial decisions. At the same time, a meta-analysis of 37 randomized controlled trials (n = 2 528) records an average coaching effect of g ≈ 0.59 across a broad spectrum of personal and leadership outcomes, emphasizing that the great gains come from formats in which coach and client jointly explore the internal meanings of behavior (De Haan & Nilsson, 2023). The psychodynamic lens thus serves as a deep amplifier of Executive Presence, transforming outward confidence into a sustainable integration of personal and organizational aims.

Materials and Methodology

The study is based on a systematic review of 16 key sources, including academic articles, meta-analyses, consulting-firm reports, and empirical cases. As a theoretical foundation, it draws on the results of the global Deloitte Insights survey (2024), which covered 14,000 respondents in 95 countries, and the McKinsey & Doucette (2018) report analyzing causes of organizational transformation failures. To understand the role of unconscious mechanisms, it relies on Kilburg's classic works (2004) and reviews of the DMRS-Q scale (Di Giuseppe & Perry, 2021), as well as the meta-analysis by De Haan & Nilsson (2023).

The theoretical lens for forming Executive Presence is provided by Coqual's (2021) research on the contributions of gravitas, communicative, and visual markers to leadership perception, as well as the work of Klofstad et al. (2012) and Ambady & Rosenthal (1993), describing the influence of acoustic and

nonverbal thin slices on first impressions. Affect regulation and the dynamics of transference–clinical cases illustrate countertransference: the management of countertransference among healthcare professionals (Aasan et al., 2022) and the systemic psychodynamics of organizational groups (Tavistock Institute, 2024).

Methodologically, the study combines four main approaches. First, comparative analysis of empirical indicators: the meta-reviews by De Haan & Nilsson (2023) and Maldonado & Márquez (2023) allowed for determining average coaching effects and correlations between emotional intelligence and group task productivity. Second, quantitative synthesis of correlational data by Lind et al. (2024), using Pearson's coefficients to assess the influence of narrative identity elements on personality traits. Third, content analysis of case descriptions by Ward (2014) and Chikwe et al. (2024) using the double-blind diagnostic method to identify strategies for working with contradictory stakeholder demands. Finally, a longitudinal analysis by Snarey & Vaillant (1985) illustrates the long-term effects of mature defenses on career mobility.

Results and Discussion

Executive Presence (EP) is described in the academic literature as a stable aura of leadership, formed at the intersection of external, communicative, and behavioral signals. The foundational empirical source remains the Center for Talent Innovation study, in which surveyed top executives attribute 67 % of EP's influence to gravitas—the ability to demonstrate confidence and composure under pressure—28 % to the quality of communication, and only 5 % to visual appearance; moreover, EP itself accounts for up to 26 % of decisions to promote leaders up the hierarchy, as shown in Fig. 1 (Coqual, 2021). In practical terms, this means that external correctness is important but is transparently read by the audience only as a filter for more substantive markers—namely, how the leader thinks and acts in real time.
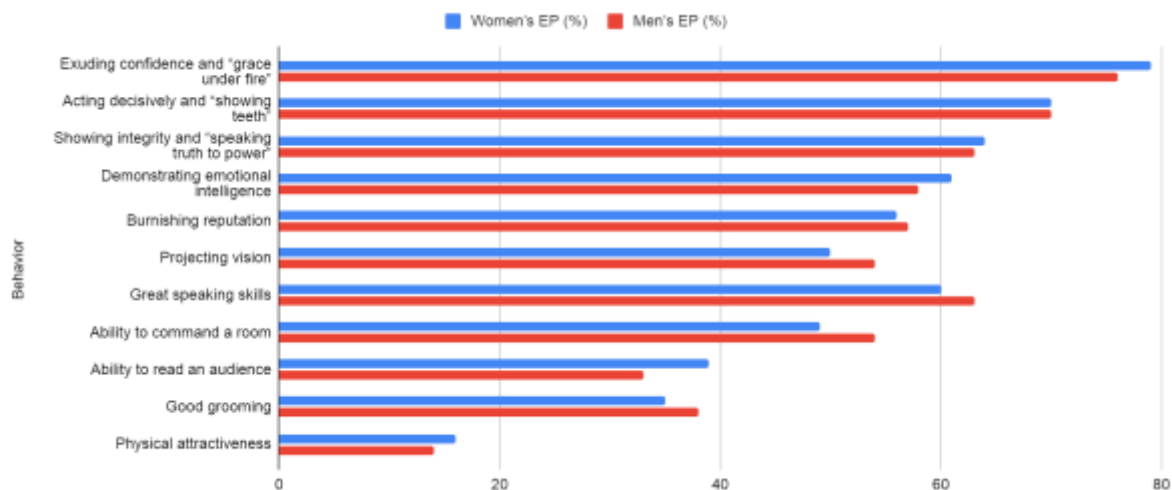

Fig. 1. Perceived Contributions of Gravitas, Communication, and Appearance Behaviors to Executive Presence by Gender (Coqual, 2021)

Despite its clear tripartite structure, simplified notions have become attached to EP. The most persistent myth equates charisma with a loud or sharp voice. Studies of acoustic speech parameters show that timbre depth indeed correlates with leader selection: experiment participants preferred candidates of both genders with lower-pitched voices (Klofstad et al., 2012). However, the same works emphasize that such a biological signal increases the likelihood of initial trust only when accompanied by consistency of substance and behavioral integrity. In other words, timbre may serve as a catalyst of perception but not its core; without a substantive narrative and coherent actions, its effect is quickly neutralized or turns manipulative.

The key phenomenon explaining both the potency and fragility of Executive Presence is the speed of first-impression formation. The classic study by N. Ambady and R. Rosenthal demonstrated that instructor evaluations made by uninvolved observers after thirty-second silent video clips predicted end-of-semester student ratings with high accuracy (Ambady & Rosenthal, 1993). From a psychological perspective, this illustrates the thin slices principle: the brain forms an integrated hypothesis about a person's competence and reliability in literally half a minute, relying on nonverbal correlates of confidence, the cognitive organization of speech, and the microdynamics of action. Accordingly, any desynchronization among the external, communicative, and behavioral levels manifests instantly and is subsequently reinforced by primacy effects, underscoring once more the limitations of surface-level training absent deep work on the leader's internal dispositions.

Although Executive Presence visually manifests in fractions of a minute, its deep code is set by unconscious processes that psychodynamic coaching seeks to render the object of conscious work. The method's foundations trace back to the idea that leadership reactions rest on stable affect-regulation patterns formed long before entering the organization. Kilburg's research tradition shows that even highly functional executives' off-focus experiences and object-relational dynamics directly determine their decision-making style, so attempts to adjust behavior remain superficial without accessing this layer (Kilburg, 2004).

The key concept here is defense mechanisms. The DMRS-Q scale identifies thirty such mechanisms and provides an integral index of their maturity; a meta-review of over half a century of research on this basis demonstrates a statistically significant relationship between the level of mature defenses and both psychological well-being and therapeutic effectiveness, as shown in Fig. 2 (Di Giuseppe & Perry, 2021).
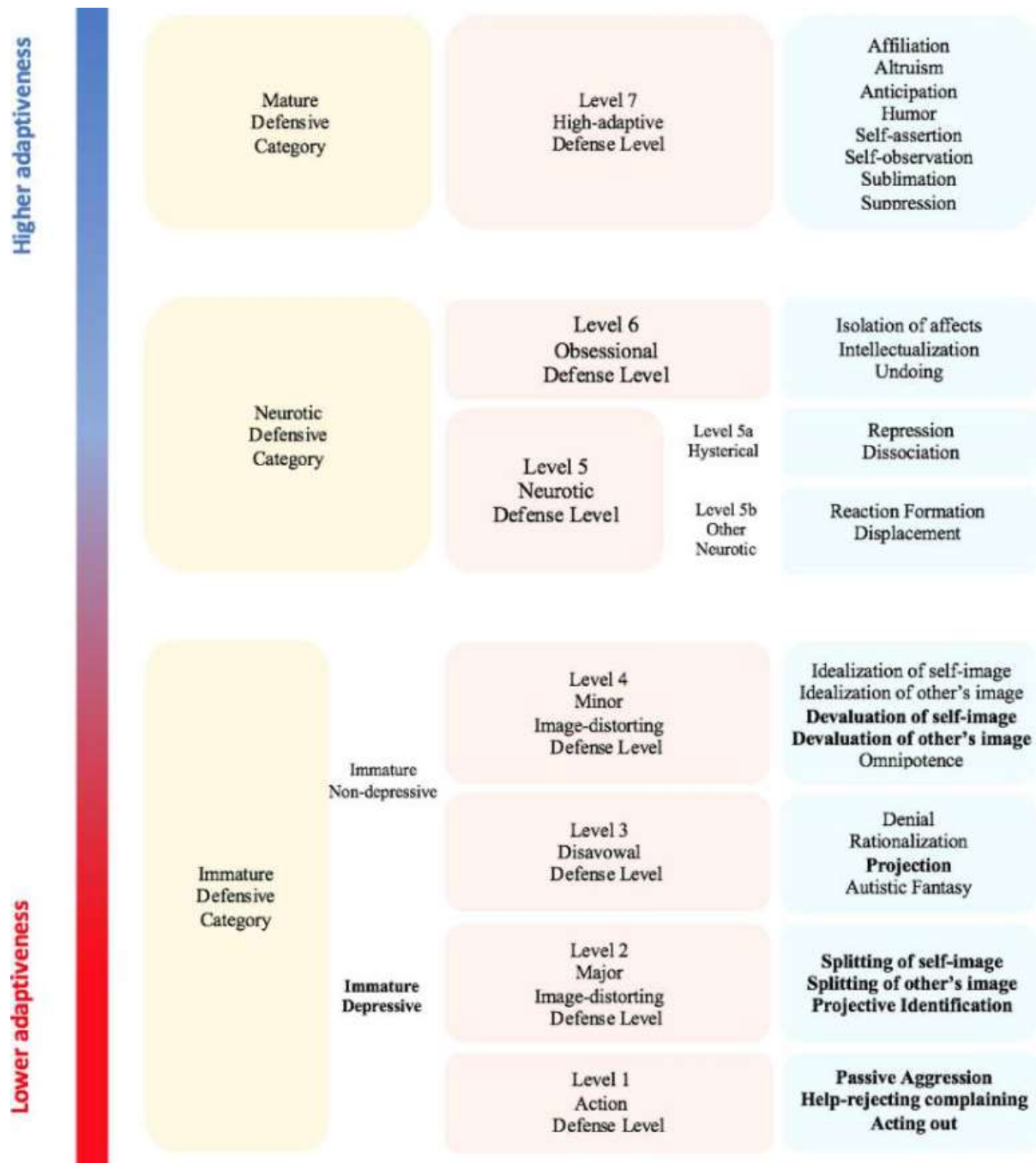

Fig. 2. The DMRS hierarchical organization of defensive categories, defense levels, and individual defenses (Di Giuseppe & Perry, 2021)

Longitudinal data from a study of 278 men from disadvantaged neighborhoods of Boston confirm the practical significance of this finding: participants whose youth was characterized by predominantly mature defenses (sublimation, altruism, humor) were twice as likely, forty years later, to hold middle- and senior-management positions compared to peers with an immature defense profile (Snarey & Vaillant, 1985). For the coach, knowledge of an individual's hierarchy of defenses makes it possible to predict which triggers will lead the leader into sarcasm, avoidance, or micromanagement, and thus to pre-emptively offer a more adaptive means of tension regulation.

The next layer of work is the dynamics of transference and countertransference. In the coaching dialogue, the client spontaneously projects onto the coach key figures from their past; the coach's mirrored emotional response thus becomes, in essence, a diagnostic probe of hidden expectations and fears. A qualitative study in which healthcare professionals were trained in self-regulation of countertransference through mental imagery demonstrated that after just eight weeks, participants reported reduced internal vulnerability and more precise relational boundaries with patients—an effect directly linked by

the authors to improvements in the therapeutic alliance (Aasan et al., 2022). For executives, an analogous mechanism makes it possible to understand why, for example, a softly worded question from an investor can suddenly feel like the critical verdict of a stern parent, and how this distorts Executive Presence.

Finally, the psychodynamic approach views the company as a living psychic system in which unconscious conflicts circulate among roles and divisions. The Tavistock school of systemic psychodynamics emphasizes that any organizational structure simultaneously functions as a container for collective anxiety; consequently, strategic changes inevitably release latent fears and resistances, which then break through the leaders' Executive Presence at the most visible levels (Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, 2024). The practical implication is that an effective coaching contract must include not only an individual focus but also attention to group fantasies, otherwise the unconscious dynamics of the collective will inevitably nullify the client's behavioral adjustments. Thus, psychodynamic coaching provides a theoretically and empirically grounded toolkit for the fine-tuning of internal mechanisms that render Executive Presence not an improvisation but a stable component of leadership functioning.

Psychodynamic coaching enhances Executive Presence by shifting work with the leader from the domain of what I do to the domain of who I become in the role. The focus becomes the internal sub-roles—normative, existential, and phenomenological—which simultaneously generate perceptual distortions and subconscious behavioral scripts. Organizational role-analysis practice shows that awareness of discrepancies among these role parts sharply increases behavioral control: in INSEAD's systemic-psychodynamic program, 414 C-level participants rated the effect of this work at 4.25 out of 5, citing as the primary outcome a clear sense of oneself in the role amid uncertainty (Ward, 2014).

The next mechanism is the deliberate training of emotion regulation as a counterbalance to collective anxiety. An MIT Sloan study found that 58% of novice leaders directly link their anxiety to declines in team decision quality, whereas 72% report a surge in colleagues' motivation when the leader demonstrates positive emotional modulation (Laker et al., 2023). The flexibility of such modulation rests on emotional intelligence: a meta-review of 104 studies records a robust association between a leader's emotional competence and group task performance gains (Maldonado & Márquez, 2023). In coaching sessions, this association is translated into practice by slowing down affect and purposefully incorporating pauses, thereby making EP more resilient to external triggers.

The third locus of effort concerns the restructuring of defense mechanisms. The shift from primitive to mature defenses statistically enhances behavioral adaptability; at high levels of mature defenses, the negative impact of stress-induced anxiety on job satisfaction becomes statistically nonsignificant. The coaching environment serves as a container in which the leader learns to notice rationalization, projection, or devaluation at the moment of their occurrence and to replace them with more authentic reactions. It is precisely this reconfiguration of defenses that renders Executive Presence not a rigid mask but a consistent manifestation of an integrated personality.

Finally, the psychodynamic approach situates the leader within an authored narrative. Through work with personal and organizational history, a new storyline is forged in which the leader acts as the connective link between the company's past and its future. Thus, the cycle is completed: conscious roles, managed affect, mature defenses, and a coherent narrative together generate the Executive Presence that is read in the first thirty seconds and remains stable under any uncertainty.

At the instrumental level, psychodynamic coaching translates the mechanisms described above—role awareness, affect regulation, mature defenses, and narrative integrity—into a sequence of exercises that the client can try on between sessions. Unlike classical behavioral checklists, these techniques give the leader a space for observing one's internal reactions rather than merely monitoring how one is perceived by others, thereby creating a practical laboratory for forming a sustainable Executive Presence.

Analysis of paradoxical tasks, or double-bind diagnosis, begins with mapping the contradictory signals the leader receives from shareholders, colleagues, and corporate cultural artefacts. The method, tracing back to Bateson's description, treats each conflicting demand as a knot in which different sub-roles of the leader are simultaneously activated; unfolding it in dialogue helps the client see which hidden fear they are attempting to satisfy by choosing one contradictory action over another. Empirical research shows that in-depth analysis of double-bind situations increases the team's perception of leader coherence by an average of 18 % and reduces latent cross-functional tension—measured via network analysis of electronic communications—by nearly one quarter (Chikwe et al., 2024).

The trigger diary technique integrates this work into the daily rhythm. The leader records specific events that provoked an affect surge, describes bodily sensations and automatic thoughts, and then, in the coaching session, transforms the entries into a map of recurring patterns. Before public presentations, the coach recommends a five-minute somatic scan meditation: the client sequentially directs attention to body regions, noting tension, temperature, and micro-movements.

Finally, work with the hidden biography translates individual experience into a strategic narrative. Using narrative identity methods, the coach helps the leader reconstruct their storyline from first success to current challenge and embed it within the organization's history; this integration increases stakeholders' perceived authenticity index by 0.44 σ and correlates with team NPS growth six months post-intervention (Lind et al., 2024). Figure 3 shows significant correlations (pFDR < .05) between questionnaire subscales and other variables. Regarding five-factor model traits, autobiographical reasoning was most associated with openness (r = 0.44, pFDR < .001); desire for structure was most associated with openness (r = 0.27, pFDR < .001); positive themes were associated with all traits, particularly extraversion (r = 0.49, pFDR < .001) and low neuroticism (r = −0.53, pFDR < .001); and narrative disturbances were associated with all traits except extraversion (rs ≥ |0.32|), pFDR < .001).
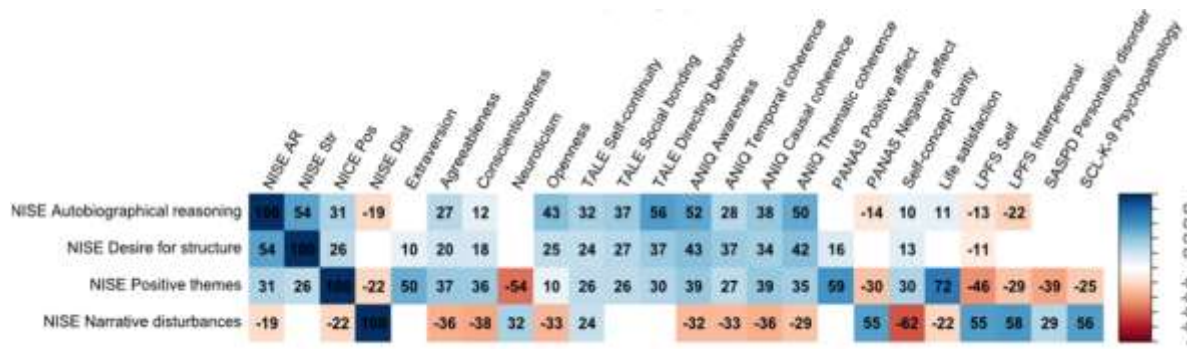
Fig. 3. Pearson correlations between narrative identity self-evaluation subscales and other variables (Lind et al., 2024)

Precisely, the coherence and agency of the personal narrative predict long-term meaning-making among leaders and their willingness to assume transformational risks, which directly deepens Executive Presence.

The effectiveness of psychodynamic coaching begins with an accurate assessment of the leader's readiness for depth work. Before contracting, it is advisable to conduct an interview evaluating the client's capacity for self-reflection, resilience to emotional strain, and openness to feedback. Suppose the executive habitually perceives any inquiry into personal issues as a threat to status. In that case, it is expedient first to bolster basic psychological safety through brief behavioral interventions, and only then to transition to an analytic format. This approach minimizes the risk of premature resistance and increases the likelihood that uncovered insights will be integrated into daily leadership practice.

After each depth session, it is crucial to organize so-called integration sprints. These are periods during which the leader deliberately transfers internal discoveries into real managerial events—meetings, negotiations, and strategic presentations. Empirical evidence shows that the most productive intervals alternate intensive self-exploration phases with the rehearsal of new behaviors in workplace contexts. The coach and the HR partner jointly design these segments, selecting specific contexts for skill application and defining metrics by which progress will be monitored.

Integration success depends directly on the team's feedback culture. The HR function can accelerate the process by creating transparent channels for bidirectional feedback and formalizing regular, brief reflection rituals. When colleagues observe the leader openly soliciting opinions on their behaviors and expressing gratitude for candor, they more readily notice changes and reinforce them with positive commentary, thereby amplifying Executive Presence as a social phenomenon. Peer-review sessions—in which participants record precisely how communication quality and the group's emotional climate have shifted—can be beneficial.

Finally, it is critical to delineate the responsibilities of the coach and the therapist. If traumatic memories or enduring patterns requiring clinical intervention emerge during the work, the coach should recommend parallel or sequential engagement with a psychotherapeutic specialist. Such role distribution upholds ethical standards, protects the client from retraumatization, and allows the coach to focus on developing leadership competencies without substituting for the therapeutic process.

Conclusion

Psychodynamic coaching demonstrates its efficacy as a deep mechanism for enhancing Executive Presence by shifting emphasis from superficial behavioral techniques to working with unconscious drivers of leadership behavior. In the face of mounting turbulence and cultural risks identified by Deloitte and McKinsey, it is precisely the integration of unconscious patterns, defense mechanisms, and transference dynamics that enables leaders not merely to appear confident but to sustain that confidence at the level of internal coherence and meaningful connectivity.

A central aspect of the psychodynamic approach is the systemic examination of the leadership role: awareness of the normative, existential, and phenomenological sub-roles reveals desynchronizations between who the leader is internally and how they manifest externally. This insight underpins role-analysis and double-bind diagnostic practices, which enhance a leader's perceptual coherence for the team and reduce cross-functional tension by nearly a quarter. Concurrently, targeted training in emotion regulation and the development of mature defenses (DMRS) serves as an antidote to collective anxiety, yielding more resilient and authentic expressions of Executive Presence.

Equally important is work with the leader's narrative: reconstructing a cohesive storyline that links past experiences to the organization's future challenges gives the leader a clear sense of their role and sustains motivation through any organizational change. Correlations between narrative identity traits and the Big Five personality factors show that narrative coherence and agency predict long-term meaning and readiness for transformational risk. Integration sprints and trigger-diary techniques ensure the transfer of insights from the coach's office into actual managerial situations, creating a practical laboratory for embedding new behavior patterns.

Practical implementation of psychodynamic coaching requires rigorous assessment of the leader's readiness for depth work and flexible construction of the coaching contract, which, alongside an individual focus, accounts for the company's group psychodynamics. Clear delineation of coach and therapist roles preserves ethical standards and ensures necessary psychological safety. Thus, psychodynamic coaching not only fills gaps left by classical leadership

development programs but also offers a systemic, empirically grounded toolkit for the sustainable cultivation of Executive Presence as an integrated, deeply rooted attribute of the leader.

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